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ABSTRACT

Parallels found between college students of the 1950s and 1970s are discussed with specific reference to campus lifestyles and events, academics, politics, and religion/morality. The comparisons are based on the author's personal experiences as a student at a state university during the 1950s and as a student personnel educator in the 1970s. Historical parallels between the two eras include: involvement in a war with no victory (Korea and Vietnam), economic recessions, transition of a nonelected president, and populist politics. Students' increased concern with grades and marketable skills in the 1970s is also comparable to similar student concerns of the 1950s. It is suggested that today students are once again concerned with getting decent grades and finding a job in a tight marketplace. The renewed popularity of fraternities and sororities and an increased use of alcohol by students are also viewed as reflections of the 1950s. Other similarities that are discussed include: the reappearance of campus-wide events, a return to serious academics, the quieting of the campus, and a renewed religious evangelism. While there is a clear historical tradition of student lifestyles and subcultures, each campus is shaped by distinctive sociological and cultural factors. It is concluded that college students in the 1970s are concerned and compassionate, however, they are also self-centered. The result is that the current campus generation is viewed not as a collective, but as a collection of individual needs, aspirations, and voices. (Author/SF)

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# COLLEGE STUDENTS OF THE 1950s AND 1970s:

# PARALLELS OF TWO GENERATIONS

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College Students of the 1950s and 1970s:

Parallels of Two Generations


## Abstract

Reported here are personal impressions of some parallels found in the campus generations of the 1950s and 1970s. Similarities in student life-styles and events, academics, politics, and religion-morality are described. Some easy documentable parallels of the decades of the 1950s and 1970s are provided first.

It is concluded that college students in the 1970s want to be chalked up as concerned and compassionate, but on their own individual terms and within a framework of "self-centeredness." The result is that the current campus generation is to be viewed not as a collective but as a collection of individual needs, aspirations, and voices.

# Students of the 1950s and 1970s:
# Parallels of Two College Generations

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## Introduction

Historian Frederick Rudolph suggested in 1966 that "college students constitute the most neglected, least understood element of the American academic community" (p. 47). In the last two decades, however, the related literature analyzing the college student population and describing different aspects of campus life has expanded noticeably (Sanford, 1962; Feldman & Newcomb, 1969; Lee, 1970; Wren, 1975). A chain of edited readings on studentry (as in citizenry) appeared in the late 1960s and continued into the early 1970s.

Changing patterns in the political, social, and religious attitudes and behavior of students have received study as well (Lipset & Ladd, 1971; Yankelovich, 1974; Bayer & Dutton, 1976; Hanson, 1976). Several articles have compared the political component of campus generations of the 1930s and 1960s (Mangano & Casebeer, 1971; Lipset & Ladd, 1971; DeMartini, 1975). Contrasts have also been drawn between the student eras of the 1950s and 1960s (Hoge, 1971; Yankelovich, 1974; Beeler, 1977).

The purpose of this article is to report personal impressions of some parallels found in both the student generations of the 1950s and 1970s. Similarities in campus lifestyles and events, academics, politics, and religion-morality are described. The comparison is based largely on previous experiences as a student during the last half of the 1950s at a state-supported regional university, and from observations as a student personnel educator since the early 1970s at a similar institution.

## Student Generations of the 1950s and 1970s

### Background

Some of the parallels of the decades of the 1950s and 1970s are easily documentable: America's involvement in a different kind of war with no victory (Korean Police Action and Vietnam Conflict); threats by the military establishment that the U.S. is lagging behind Russia in attack capability and the accompanying fear that is accorded the almighty Bomb (Atom and Neutron); economic recessions (1953 and 1958 and 1972-1975); transition of a non-elected president (Roosevelt to Truman and Nixon to Ford); and populist politics (Eisenhower and Carter administrations).

If the longevity of a college student generation can be described as four years, then close to five generations since the 1950s have passed through the portals of higher education. Of course the composition and attendance patterns of students have changed. For example, in 1955 there was almost a fifty-fifty split between enrollees in public and private higher education with two-thirds of the institutions under independent auspices. Now, with almost two and one-half as many students enrolled, three-fourths of all enrollees are at state-supported institutions which account for one-half of the total colleges and universities.

Opportunities for a college degree have gradually expanded from a preserve of the upper middle class to a much wider segment of the population. A grateful government which provided the original G.I. Bill in 1946, extended many of the same provisions to returning servicemen of the Korean War. The effect of this subsidy for college-level study was that the campus population of the 1950s changed dramatically and rapidly. Just as the Selective Service Act and the NDEA of 1958 opened college doors to many first generation students, so did additional Federal financial aid programs (BEOG, SEOG) in the 1970s provide

first-time enrollment chances for many minority and ethnic group members.

The college students of the 1950s have been labeled by pop sociologists as the "Silent Generation." The silence stemmed largely from a visible lack of commitment to political and social affairs. Growing up in the 1950s was rather like walking in a fog; one had to grope to achieve anything, from political experience to sexual savvy. In terms of personality, the 1950s had little sense of excitement, limited spirit, and no elan. Students on the campus were generally matter-of-fact and somber. Essentially, they were concerned about getting good grades, getting a good job after graduation, and getting on with things in life--marriage, family, and career. In short, the decade of the 1950s was a period of assimilation, and American quietism was a paradoxical response to a period of tremendous and significant social and cultural change, much of it an outgrowth of the advancing technology and post-war economic prosperity.

The 1970s has been a period of regrouping on the part of college students and much of society. Collectively, there is little lingering concern from the previous decade about civil liberties, environmental improvement, natural resources conservation, and corporate impersonality. Such broad and more abstract social-political issues are not generally within daily worries of people. Attention is now given on campus to factors that affect students personally (tuition hikes, mandatory housing, educational consumerism) and immediately (rising costs of utilities, food prices, unemployment).

An existing parallel of the two student generations is that this age group often is a leading barometer of the national mood. As in the 1950s, the current crop of students are similarly tired of war, afraid of runaway inflation, and somewhat frightened by the unstableness of Federal policies. Both eras reflect a looking inward, a renewed "privatism." Writer Tom Wolfe calls the 1970s the

"Me" decade of self-gratification and self-improvement. It is probably fair to label the current studentry as the "self-centered" generation. And in that regard, they are homologous to their earlier counterparts.

Campus Lifestyles and Events

On the Midwestern campus in the 1950s a grey flannel suit was a must. Blue blazers with gold metallic buttons were popular as were khaki-colored and corduroy pants. A pair of "dirty bucks," saddle shoes, or both were necessaries. Hair cuts were generally short with the "cut over-the-ear" style prominent. The college girl of the same era wore sweaters and skirts; jeans, bermudas, wool dresses, loafers and sandals were part of the standard wardrobe. The short, carelessly casual cut was the "in" hair style. Today, diversity in styles (cheap and durable items to coat-and-tie) is accepted and perhaps there is no other clear trend in clothing fashion for students. However, within the acceptance of individuality in dress and appearance, a return to the "non-grub" look is becoming evident.

On most campuses, "booze" (primarily beer) has replaced marijuana as the students' prime means of getting "high." Alcohol is also legal, easily accessible, and generally cheaper than drugs which have become inflated in price in the last several years. It is true, of course, that campus rules related to alcohol use have been liberalized. Enroute to finding a new source of "high" and a socially condoned one, students are emulating their own parents in many cases. Actually, students are also rediscovering the old "high" producing standby of their 1950s counterparts.

Today, students do not think of themselves as just students but as adults getting a higher education. Once again young people are concerned with getting decent grades and finding a job in a tight marketplace. Although students are demonstrating a renewed seriousness, they continue to blow off steam and in

doing so have resurrected some collegiate traditions prevalent in the 1950s.

Student enthusiasm and support for campus-wide events are again evident in the form of homecoming parades, queen and other judging contests, and formal dances. Graduates once again attend graduation-commencement ceremonies. At major universities a varsity sport (usually football or basketball) is once more the most cohesive student force on campus. It is not all bad to say you are "rah-rah" for sports. There is a growing involvement again in intramurals, club, and recreation programs. Students are also pressing for more institutional support for open-participation athletic activities and facilities. Prominent during the 1950s were week-long programs that focused on the international community and the foreign student on campus. A renewed effort is being made to attract students from other nations; international festivals, however, in many cases have been transformed into humanitarian and ethnic week celebrations.

Individuals are again affiliating with the campus Greek system and the number of chapter locals is increasing. However, sororities and fraternities pledge classes now tend to be different in composition; a mix of liberal and conservative political views, religious orientations, and racial backgrounds is found. Participation in ROTC programs has also become acceptable again. The actual count of colleges with ROTC programs has increased moderately despite the lack of a Selective Service System and the presence of a Volunteer Army. In contrast to the 1950s, the military training is now optional and available to women.

Student associations are being changed in name to student governments. Although the switch is happening slowly, these retitled groups are again being viewed as a legitimate function and deserving part of student life. Voting in student elections is increasing as is the pool of candidates available and running for campus offices.

While the student newspaper operations of some major universities have moved off campus or become incorporated, the majority of newspaper staffs once more tend to be composed of students interested in a journalism career. The campus press today does include expanded investigative reporting on local community and institutional issues. Sales of college yearbooks are increasing with graduates showing up again for senior photos.

Academics

Probably not since the 1950s have students been so pragmatic in their outlook, and so highly oriented toward careers and financial security. Yet, today's students are equally worried about the future uncertainties of the economy and in preparing adequately for lucrative and satisfying jobs. However, a new dimension has been added: As part of the enduring heritage of the 1960s, students want careers that provide greater self-expression and self-fulfillment along with high salaries. Once again, a prevailing feeling is that students cannot afford to waste their time or their money.

There is a return to campus of academic rigor and competition. Seniors are worried about theses and getting into graduate-professional schools; juniors are worried about career plans; sophomores are worried about maintaining high grades; and freshmen are going "crazy" over getting grades. The pressure for academic survival was portrayed in the recent West Point Academy cheating scandal which was a replica of a similar event in the 1950s at that institution.

A recent Ladd-Lipset survey (1977) on how professors viewed today's students revealed several academic perceptions also held by instructors in the 1950s. Of the faculty members surveyed, 51 percent agreed strongly or with reservations that the mood of their students is better suited to a successful educational experience than was the student mood of five or ten years ago. Also, fewer than one of three instructors (29%) disagreed with reservations or

disagreed strongly that "Students have become overly grade conscious, too narrow and 'careerist' in their concerns."

Traditional letter grades are once again the standard with the decline in the number of "credit-noncredit" and "pass-fail" courses offered. Also occurring is an increase in "no need" and merit scholarships awards. This form of financial aid was used prominently in the 1950s to attract outstanding students to the campus.

Core courses are again being stressed as academic standards tighten. There is a slowdown in the recent grade inflation and a drop in the all-campus grade point average. Fanciful elective courses are frequently dismissed as being irrelevant. "Bread-and-butter" courses are now more in demand; accounting is the most popular undergraduate course. A shortage of graduates in selected fields of engineering is being predicted which is a parallel to the 1950s.

In general, there is a "back to basics" movement among educators. Student developmental programs (formerly labeled remedial), in reading, writing, and study skills are becoming commonplace. Recommendations that students be able to pass basic skills tests in language and mathematics usage are also reappearing. Use of tests to screen out poorly prepared students before admissions, or to determine who should be enrolled in developmental courses, is gaining support. However, popular complaints about the alleged inability of college graduates to speak effectively and write correctly are not new. They have been voiced frequently over many decades including the 1950s.

Politics

Campus reaction to big political development today is mild and certainly not to the rancorous extremes of just a few years ago. A large majority of students once again seem more intent on using their college education as a means of entering the "system" rather than as preparation for reforming it.

Now it is not out of vogue to say you disagree with those who disagree with the "establishment." It could be argued that one reason students have abandoned confrontation tactics is a concern that such activities might jeopardize their job references and resumes. A parallel response from students occurred during the period of McCarthyism that was so blatantly present in the 1950s. The McCarthy purge for identifying Communists cast a pall on the campus; an atmosphere of general mistrust existed.

Conservatism, as an ideology, reamined a persistent current among a large sector of the American studentry in the 1950s. Senator Barry Goldwater was a much-sought-after speaker. The conservative philosophy did not, however, serve as a base for the emergence of a student movement. Nor does the current political turn to the Right show any signs of generating a movement based on it.

The 1954 Supreme Court decision on segregation focused the attention of college students on a key issue in American society for perhaps the first time, and ushered in an era of active and even militant student campaigns. Ending the war in Vietnam and the Watergate expose served as stimulants for a series of demonstrations and a similar student outcry in the early 1970s. But once again, as in the early 1950s, no single issue now concerns the campus population.

By 1950s' standards, many students today can still be called activists although they concentrate mostly on matters that affect their individual lives--getting good grades, paying for an education, finding a job. Students organize and demonstrate over issues directly related to those personal concerns--quality of education received, adequate student financial aid, volume of campus recruitment. Student activism is a lot more sophisticated now with a wider range of tactics, formal alliances of many different groups, shifts in leadership including the formation of statewide and multi-campus student lobbying organizations, and use of the judicial process to seek remedy. In characterizing the

recent student activist era, sociologist Andrew Greeley (1972) indicated that "The Movement ends not with a bang but with a whimper, and a new age of disenchantment, perhaps not unlike the 1950s, is upon us" (p. 43).

Religion-Morality

Henry Van Dusen, then president of Union Theological Seminary, could still report in 1958 that "nowhere do the tides of religious awakening flow more powerfully than among the younger generation, especially on college and university campuses." This religious revolution was the emotional-intellectual expression of the conservative fundamentalist religion of the 1950s.

There is currently a resurgence of evangelical expression and fundamentalist thought, but this time various Far Eastern forms of religion are mixed in. The direction of change is clearly toward less religious orthodoxy and less affiliation with formal religious organizations. Religious cults are receiving increased public attention once again. Nation-wide media coverage has accompanied popular reactions ranging from curiosity to alarm. Several of the marginal religious movements are national in scope (The Unification Church, The Divine Light Mission, The Children of God, The International Society for Krishna Consciousness, The Way International) and appeal basically to middle class, 18-25 year age youth. Today's cult leaders could be accused of exploiting an old phenomenon of the 1950s in a new fashion.

Political opinion analysts document that the moral values that flourished on the campus in the last decade have become stronger. More liberal sexual mores seem to have become a rather fixed characteristic among many American young people, and the decline in political and social activism has not signalled an across-the-board retreat from those values. At most colleges the sexual revolution is over; premarital sex and cohabitation among unmarried college students are now accepted as largely a matter of fact. The new campus morality seems to

involve more depth and less hypocrisy; there is a sense of caring and commitment. Today's sexual behavior has been termed "person-centered" rather than "body-centered." The former demands mutual respect, love, understanding, and the willingness of both partners to accept responsibility of the consequences of their actions. Tolerance of homosexual and bisexual behavior has been expanding. Organizations that express these sexual preferences are being formed on campuses; this movement is a distinct departure from the student morality of the 1950s.

One of the strongest similarities between the generations of the 1950s and 1970s lies in the area of student "privatism." The intensity of concern and the style of expression do differ, however. In the earlier period, many educated young people felt they had to split their lives into two distinct parts. At work, the focus was on getting ahead within the corporate structure and largely by maintaining its mores. This was the era of the "organization man;" one retreated from the real world into one's private and personal world only during off-work time. "A mental wall separated the world of work from private life" (p. 46) observed social researcher Daniel Yankelovich (1974).

Another major difference between the "privatism" of the 1950s and the present is that there seems to be a new definition of success and a changing job criteria. Students now believe it is possible to seek and find personal reward in their careers while earning a reasonable income that enables them to lead full and prosperous life outside of their work. They recognize that personal self-fulfillment and private values can be consolidated and synthesized within career goals. Today, students are looking for a kind of psychological security as well as economic security.

## Conclusion

There are observers of the higher education scene who believe that a new age of disengagement by students, not unlike the 1950s, is upon us. It is

possible, of course, that the youth culture is preparing for a return to the apathetic safety of that earlier era. As pointed out in this article, there are some parallels that offer warning signals: the reappearance of many institution-wide events; a return to serious academics; the quieting of the campus; and a renewed religious evangelism.

While there is a clear historical tradition of student lifestyles and subcultures, each campus generation is still marked and shaped by distinctive sociological and cultural factors. Greeley (1972) reminds us, "One of the iron laws of changing student generations is that nothing is dissimilar as comparing last year's seniors with this year's incoming freshmen" (p. 47).

In sum, college students in the 1970s want to be chalked up as concerned and compassionate, but on their own individual terms and within a framework of "self-centeredness." The result is that the current campus generation is to be viewed not as a collective but as a collection of individual needs, aspirations, and voices.

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